

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now 'The House We Sheltered In' picture book makes sense of the pandemic, with help from four Twin Cities illustrators 01H1XP4J91KSJXB1EK3EFBR76

CATHY WURZER: COVID may no longer officially be a pandemic. But writers and artists will be working for years to come to create pieces that help us make sense of what we've been through. Freeman Ng, of St. Paul, is one such writer. Here he is reading from his new picture book, *TheHouseWeShelteredIn*.

FREEMAN NG: After the stories read and told, after the video chats that pulled far-off friends into the room, after the games we played for fun, after the meals we shared as one, passing food with grateful hands washed with soap again and again that cleaned the knobs and panes and pans of all the homes we sheltered in.

CATHY WURZER: The picture book is unique in a couple of ways. If you flip the same book around, you can read a different story, same rhythm, called, *The Masks We Wore*. And here's the other unique bit, 14 different illustrators from across the country contributed to the pictures. Our producer, Emily Bright, spoke with Ng, along with three illustrators based in the Twin Cities metro area-- Annie Kuhn, Alicia Schwab, and Sara Nintzel.

EMILY BRIGHT: I have to say, this book brought tears to my eyes. It's such a charming book. Freeman, I want to start with you. Tell me about the process of making this book.

FREEMAN NG: Well, the book started with an earlier book that I created, a kind of print-it-yourself mini picture book, that just consisted of the first poem, *The House We Sheltered In*. And I wrote that near the beginning of the pandemic when I looked around and saw that there were lots of teachers and parents looking for more resources for their homebound kids.

So I wrote this poem, and I paired it with my own digital art because that was the fastest way just to get it out there. And I put it out there in a form where you could download the PDF and print it out on your own printer and then staple it together, and then you'd have a little picture book.

Then the pandemic continued, to everyone's partial surprise and chagrin. And I began seeing that there was a lot of talk about the measures we were taking, like masking and distancing and so forth, that were in a similar vein to the talk that I was hearing about the sheltering in place, which was that it was mostly about the inconveniences of it, the costs, and so forth.

And I wanted to offer something that presented the flip side of that. And I wanted to celebrate the joys of homebound life. I wanted to celebrate the really heroic measures that a lot of people took, the collective, incremental, yet heroic measures that we all took to stave off the pandemic. And that's when I wrote the second poem. And I decided that this time, I wanted it to be really illustrated by real artists.

I basically cold-called or cold-emailed dozens of illustrators, over 200 in the end. I couldn't offer them any upfront money. I could only offer them a share of the royalties. And so everyone who joined the project did so either because they believed that it would sell well enough that it'd be worth their while or that they just believed in the book enough that they wanted to help make it real. And so I just want to thank the three of you, Sara, Alicia, and Annie, once again right here.

ALICIA SCHWAB: This is Alicia. So early on in the pandemic, I sewed about 500 cloth masks and gave them away. And so when Freeman approached me with this project, I thought, wow, this is something that I could contribute to. And it's right in my wheelhouse, making illustrations. This would be a great way to help kids process this longlasting traumatic event that we've all been through.

SARA NINTZEL: And this is Sara. I'm a mom of two young boys, soon to be three. And one of them was born in 2020. And so I just love that this book sparks a conversation for parents and their kids, but it's in a positive light, and things were different but how people adjusted to keep everyone healthy and safe.

ANNIE KUHN: This is Annie. And when the pandemic started, I was living in Upstate New York teaching at a college. And I was one of the teachers who had to all of a sudden learn how to teach online. And I was also living out in the country. The isolation factor was gigantic. We adults need help processing this.

What I really like also about it is this team of illustrators, this is a completely unique situation. You might see a couple of illustrators collaborating, but this is different. And what I love about it is that this team approach echoes the theme of the book in which we all shared this collective experience but each in our own unique way.

FREEMAN NG: Because I wasn't paying anybody upfront, I didn't think that I could impose specific assignments and set concrete deadlines. So we had a very fluid system where people could sign up for as many images as they thought they wanted to do. And they could finish them when they finished them, and the group would just proceed and the project would proceed in that way. Some illustrators ended up only doing a single image, but they contributed. And some had the time to do more, and so they did more.

EMILY BRIGHT: I love the layout of the book because you have-- and maybe it just made sense-- you had different artists all working together, different timelines and different places. And so they're just these side by side cells illustrating the poem, and they're laid out in a way that it's kind of like playing separately together. Everyone individually are all doing these things in their separate spaces. And also, it doesn't look like a Zoom call. It's not that grid, which I appreciate. I think we're all allergic to that at this point. So I think it just visually works very well.

FREEMAN NG: Some of those small cells, though, contain images of Zoom call grids within them.

EMILY BRIGHT: Are there particular images or moments or lines in the book that really sing for you or that you're proud of?

SARA NINTZEL: This is Sara. I tried to do just some different images of a home where there's art on the window and kids playing out, making sidewalk chalk art. And I did a picture of my boys at the sink washing the dishes.

ALICIA SCHWAB: This is Alicia. We have these cells that go around the page, I guess, in a clockwise direction. And I created an image that crosses over two cells that just shows kids playing games, eating cookies, popcorn, and just their hands. So I think that is one thing that appears again and again in this book is hands. We've got hands washing, hands cleaning, hands working together and being kind to each other.

FREEMAN NG: Yeah, that illustration stood out to me. That pair of illustrations stood out for me too because the general scheme of the book was that each cell illustrates one line of the poem. And Alicia signed up for two consecutive cells, for two consecutive lines. And she managed to create a single two-part illustration.

The lines were, "these are the games we played for fun, after the meals we shared as one." So the top illustration illustrates the checkerboard, the game. And the bottom portrayed the snacks that the kids are eating at the time. So together, those two illustrations illustrated those two consecutive lines. So I thought that was very clever.

ANNIE KUHN: This is Annie. I was one of the last, if not the last, illustrator to join the project. And so I had the advantage of seeing that PDF that Freeman put together. And I could see, oh, well, I feel like this is missing or that is missing. And so one of the things was, there are two spreads of houses, various houses. And Freeman had said, we need a little bit of diversity in housing also. And it was coming in.

But my dad lives down in the desert. And the houses down there don't look anything at all like the houses up here. And so that was one thing I was able to do is I did an illustration of my dad's house to give that Southwest flavor. But yeah, Freeman's guidelines were very, very subtle, very gentle, just saying, hey, maybe we could use a little bit more of this.

EMILY BRIGHT: Thank you, everyone, for your time. And best of luck on this as you get this book into readers' hands.

ANNIE KUHN: Thank you, Emily.

FREEMAN NG: Thanks, Emily.

ALICIA Thank you.

SCHWAB:

SARA NINTZEL: Thank you for having us.

CATHY That's producer Emily Bright speaking with artists behind the picture book, *The House We Sheltered In*. You can
WURZER: find it at your local bookstore. Arts programming at MPR made possible in part by the Minnesota Legacy Amendments Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.